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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL MEZZES: SLICES OF LIFE FROM TURKEY'S MEGALOPOLIS

Sensitive but unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

1. (U) This is the third in a series of cables offering a sampling of political, economic and human rights topics circulating in Istanbul.

Vatican II) Muslim Style?

2. (SBU) We recently attended a Koran reading and sermon at Sehzelebasi Mosque in the Eminonu-Fatih area, the heart of Istanbul's devout Muslim community, led by a very young (30ish), accomplished imam who has won a number of international competitions for Koran recitation and who -- rather uniquely -- offers the sermon first in Arabic and then in Turkish. The invitation to attend came from a group of Turkish intellectuals, artists and businesspersons who suggested at a gathering after the service that their hope is to encourage a natural, non-politicized practice of traditional Islam; in other words, an Islam that is not associated with a particular political party (read: AKP), but rather one which flows naturally from and within its surrounding Turkish culture, under a secular State's protection. The topic of that day's reading was moderation and balance in life. Attendees claimed the Imam's Friday sermons attract up to 5,000 worshippers.

How Quickly We Forget

3. (U) November marked the second anniversary of the Al Qaeda bombings of two Istanbul synagogues (November 15, 2003), and the British Consulate and an HSBC branch (November 20, 2003). The Jewish community marked November 15 with a low-profile wreath-laying ceremony at a monument erected by the Beyoglu municipality, while the November 20 commemoration took place at the British Consulate. Very few Istanbul residents turned out to memorialize those lost in the four bombings, and Turkish press quoted British CG Barbara Hay as expressing disappointment in the low level of participation. Many of our contacts downplay the November 2003 incidents as anomalous attacks not directed at the "Turkish people" and contrast them with PKK activity.

We Shall Always Remember, On The Other Hand

4. (SBU) Istanbul came to a standstill November 10 at 9:05am to commemorate the moment of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's death sixty-seven years ago. With sirens wailing and the usually bustling traffic and activity around Taksim Square immobilized, Istanbul's Governor, Mayor and Land Forces Commander, surrounded by city notables, stood at attention on the Square, paying their respects to the founder of modern Turkey. In a two-hour program following the salute, Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler praised Ataturk as an "idea man," but a War Academy representative stole the show with a well-conceived 23-slide powerpoint presentation about Ataturk's achievements. Students were featured throughout the program, reciting poems and performing oratories about the leader. The only blot on the day was when the Governor felt obliged to reprimand students -- via an instruction to the master of ceremonies -- who were unable to keep it down to a dull roar during performances by Istanbul opera stars.

A Facelift Chez Mme. Tussaud

5. (SBU) Perhaps the most widely publicized event this past November 10 was the unveiling of a new Ataturk waxwork at London's Madame Tussaud's museum. An earlier version had drawn complaints from thousands of Turkish tourists who complained the waxwork looked nothing like Turkey's hero. (Note: Indeed, the earlier version as seen on Turkish television more closely resembled Bob Hope. End note.) Apparently Turkish diplomats earlier had attempted to address the issue, but not until the involvement of Koc Holding, Turkey's leading conglomerate, did a project to replace the flawed waxwork pick up steam. The Koc group reportedly employed a team for more than one year to prepare a new figure. At the unveiling, Koc Chairman Mustafa Koc declared

that "Turkey was progressing in the direction Ataturk desired" and that it was his firm's duty to promote Turkey and its history during this important time.

How Quickly We Forget, Part Two

16. (U) After seven years, one of the handful of cases against contractors and construction engineers responsible for substandard buildings that collapsed in the 1999 Duzce earthquake came to an end, not with a bang but with a whimper. The three men charged were found guilty, but fined only YTL 50 (USD 37) each. Scandalized press headlines calculated that the decision valued the 15 lives lost in the quake and the building in question at YTL 3.3 each.

Glass Walls, Not Ceilings

17. (SBU) A 19-year-old Turkish female appeared at Conoff's window recently seeking a visa to visit friends in New York. Poised and possessed of fluent English, she came from a wealthy family long established in Istanbul and was studying International Relations at Koc University, one of the city's premier institutions of higher education. When Conoff asked if she was interested in becoming a diplomat, the young lady demurred and said that, because of who she was, she could not. Assuming the applicant was referring to her gender and recalling that Turkey had had a female prime minister, Conoff expressed surprise that such discrimination persisted in the Foreign Ministry. In response, the woman smiled and explained that the problem was not related to gender but to religion and perceived ethnicity. She claimed that, as a Christian of Armenian descent, she would never receive an appointment to the Turkish diplomatic corps, which selected only "true Turks" to represent the Republic abroad.

Make A Wish

18. (U) Demonstrating that they do much more than lunch, a number of Istanbul's leading socialites (including a number of successful businesswomen), launched the Istanbul chapter of Make A Wish Foundation in late November with a gala dinner at a local 5-star hotel, the highlight of which was the auctioning of five pieces of jewelry created especially for the occasion. Within 25 minutes, over 625,000 YTL had been raised (i.e. over half a million dollars). In an extravagant gesture, the successful bidder on one item of jewelry donated the piece to be re-auctioned, following which a number of people in the audience began donating personal items of jewelry to be auctioned. All for show! huffed one Turkish table companion, although clearly in the minority in his criticism.

A Bar Mitzvah, Istanbul Style

19. (SBU) This metropolitan mosaic, like any mega-city, offers great contrasts and diverse cultures. A recent Bar Mitzvah held at the Ciragan Palace showcased both Istanbul's Jewish elite and its broader (botoxed and bejeweled) Bosphorus elite. The black-tie evening began with a caviar, sushi and champagne reception. Guests were then led through a draped corridor, with dancers in silhouette striking various poses, to a dining hall where a five-course meal awaited and more silver-skinned dancers reminiscent of the Cirque du Soleil pranced on table tops, followed by a risqué floor show. The highlight was a bare-chested, pony-tailed young man dressed in a dervish-like blue and white diagonally striped mega-skirt who sang, high on his platform, while half a dozen similarly scantily clad young men twirled around him, twisting the skirt into interesting patterns. The absence of a klezmer band and traditional "hora" notwithstanding - and despite the fact that the only yarmulke in the house was worn by a Jewish friend visiting from New York -- toasts of "L,chaim" reverberated throughout the evening, and the young man being feted appropriately honored his large extended family, personally thanking them one by one, as the guests danced well into the morning.

Hidden Agendas

10. (U) A common theme of dinner discussion here is whether or not PM Erdogan and his AKP have a hidden (Islamist/sharia) agenda they are waiting to spring on an unwitting Turkish populace. At a recent event hosted by a Western diplomatic colleague, a prominent businessman drew a bleak picture of Turkey's future under such a regime, while acknowledging he had no interest in getting involved in politics or otherwise positively engaging in civil society to thwart any such agenda. In response to the question What's the worst case scenario if Erdogan were to prevail with such an agenda? the man replied: Well, they could restrict alcohol being served during Ramadan. To which his

wife responded: &And so?8

Hamam and Cheese

11. (U) Conoff took advantage of a dreary Sunday afternoon following Ramadan to indulge in a soak and a scrub at the centuries-old SultanAhmet Turkish bath in the heart of historic Istanbul. Lounging on the steaming marble slabs nearby were two regulars, fifty-something men, one a native-born Turk and the other an Istanbulite of Greek heritage. Presaging the next day's headlines concerning the "souring" of Turkey-Greece relations (note: as the Greek PM postponed a planned visit to Turkey for the second time this year), the men carried on a loud and apparently longstanding argument over the relative merits of feta and beyaz peynir, the traditional Turkish white cheese. Upon learning that conoff was American, the two asked which cheese was more popular in the United States. When conoff replied that feta is by far the better known, the erstwhile Greek crowed about feta's transatlantic triumph. In an attempt to shut him up, the Turk sputtered that while beyaz peynir has an agreeable smell, feta "stinks no matter how you cut it."
JONES